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THE CHURCH FATHERS AND THE ORIENTAL CULTS¹

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In a paper which I read some time ago before the American Philological Association I sketched the attitude of one of the Church Fathers, Tertullian, toward the indigenous Roman gods and the divinities that had been introduced into Rome from Greece. Now I am approaching the subject from another angle, dealing with a considerable number of ecclesiastical writers, but confining myself to a discussion of their attitude toward one group of ancient religious beliefs—the oriental cults commonly referred to under the term *sacra peregrina*. One of these was introduced into Rome at the end of the third century before Christ, others in the last period of the Republic, and many more under the Empire.

The Romans had always been tolerant in matters of religion. They did not believe that their gods were the only gods. They did not have the slightest objection to foreigners bringing with them to Rome their own deities and religious practices and making converts there. They went even farther than that. The Roman state itself frequently gave official recognition to foreign cults. This policy of religious tolerance began at an early period in Roman history, and by the middle of the third century before Christ Roman religion consisted of a medley of Greek and Latin beliefs, with the Greek element dominant and crowding the indigenous cults off the field. The ultimate explanation of this situation is to be found in a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the old creeds and in doubt and uncertainty as to the efficacy of the purely Roman ritual. At any rate it was at national crises that some of the most important Greek cults were introduced. A pestilence that occurred about the end of the regal period was the occasion of the importation of the worship of Apollo, who was to the Romans of that time and for some

¹ Read at the thirteenth annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, Louisville, 1917.

centuries afterward chiefly a god of healing. A failure of crops and a serious shortage in food in the second decade of the Republic resulted in the introduction under the name of Ceres of the Greek Demeter upon whose favor the fertility of the fields was supposed to depend. But not even the Greek gods seemed to the Romans equal to all emergencies, and they turned to oriental beliefs. It was at a time of great national depression, the year 204 B.C., when Hannibal and his army of invasion had been in Italy for many years and there seemed but small chance of driving him out, that the Senate decreed that the cult of the Asiatic divinity Cybele, the Great Mother as she was called, the chief divinity of the Phrygians, should be established in Rome. This was done, and some years later a temple dedicated to her was built in the heart of the city, on the Palatine itself, where the ruins lying in a grove of live-oaks may still be seen. Early in the first century before Christ the worship of the Egyptian Isis was introduced, and at the end of the first century of the Empire came the most famous of all these oriental worships—the cult of the Persian Mithras. Just how strong these cults were in the last days of the Republic and in the first century of the Empire we do not know precisely, but they seem to have attracted votaries from the first days of their establishment. Circumstances favored them. The national religion was in a state of demoralization and decay. Nothing shows this more clearly than Augustus' measures of reform. In that record of the achievements of his reign which we have in the *Monumentum Ancyranum* he states that he restored eighty-two temples which had crumbled into ruins. Besides this he found it necessary to reorganize the priesthoods, and he filled the office of flamen Dialis, which had had no incumbent for seventy-five years.¹ But even this attempt to galvanize the old creeds into something like life failed. Men could not find in them satisfaction for those spiritual longings, that craving for a more individualistic faith that permeated the Greco-Roman world at the beginning of our era. And so they turned to the oriental gods, most of whom made a strong emotional appeal. Nor is there any doubt that the spread of the worship of these divinities among the Romans paved the way for Christianity, which during the first

¹ Tacitus *Ann.* iii. 58.

three centuries was regarded by the educated class as nothing more than one of the many oriental religions that had found their way to Rome. The persecution of the Christians was not in the first place due to any intolerance of their religious beliefs, but to a fear that they were socially dangerous.

During the second, third, and fourth centuries the oriental cults attained great popularity, and while their appeal was mainly to the lower classes, it was by no means confined to them. We know that the emperor Commodus himself became a devotee of Isis. He is said to have submitted to the tonsure usual among her priests, to have marched in the sacred processions organized in her honor, and to have carried in his hands an image of that grotesque deity which belonged to the circle of Isis, the dog-headed god Anubis, with which either in religious fervor or with royal humor he from time to time smote the head of the high priest who walked in front of him. Possibly he had given him precedence with malice aforethought, or he may have been moved by a desire to assist him in the mortification of the flesh.

We have other records attesting the favor which these cults found in high places, and of their great vogue among the masses we have abundant evidence in dedicatory inscriptions. In brief, during the third and fourth centuries, the period to which most of the polemics of the Church Fathers belong, they were absorbing a very large part of the religious vitality of Rome.

In this paper I shall confine my discussion to the Fathers' attacks upon three of these cults—those to which I have already referred: the Great Mother, Isis, and Mithras; and even in the case of these I shall not in the space available be able to go very deeply into the details of their worship. The Great Mother was originally a spirit of vegetation, connected with the fertility of the soil; Isis belonged to the same general field; while Mithras was a god of light. But all three developed phases which seem at first thought far removed from their original functions; and, widely as their ritual and practices differed, they had certain elements in common: the ideas of repentance, absolution, and hope of happiness in the world to come. These were the features that appealed so strongly to the converts, who felt that they had here something

that the formalism of the old cults did not offer. Especially effective was the hope of a future life, for this had played no part in the original Roman theology. These characteristics of the oriental beliefs remind one inevitably of important tenets of the Christian faith, and it is largely on this account that so many skeptics have maintained that Christianity was earth-born and not heaven-sent; that it had no special message; that it merely reflected ideas which were current in the world at the time and which found expression through the media of different creeds and rituals.

To be more specific, there are many resemblances between the Isis-cult and some forms of Christianity: the tonsure of the priests, their white garb, the fasts, the use of holy water and incense, and the elevation of sacred objects. There are similarities also between the processions of the votaries of Isis and the processions seen in some Catholic countries in Europe. There is evidence that a devotee could sometimes procure the cult statue of Isis and take it to his house for a specified period, just as in Russia images of the Madonna are said to be sometimes borrowed from the churches and placed for a time in private houses. The same sort of thing is done in Rome today. The use of little bells in some of the churches in Southern Italy is said to go back to the use of the *sistrum* in the ritual of Isis. The rich adornment of statues of Isis may be compared with the equipment of some statues of the Madonna in Christian churches.

Between Mithraism and Christianity there are also numerous points of resemblance.¹ Like the Christians, the followers of Mithras were organized in relatively small groups or congregations, the members of which lived in close fellowship, as is shown by the term "brother" which they applied to one another and the greeting "father" with which they addressed the priest. Like the Christians, they had baptism, confirmation, and communion. Like that of the Christians their moral system was a strict one; they preached continence, chastity, self-denial, and self-control. They believed that the world had once been destroyed by a flood for its sins; they believed in the immortality of the soul, in the resurrection of the dead, in a heaven for the blessed, and a hell where evil spirits dwelt.

¹ Aust, *Römische Religion*, p. 167.

Moreover, it was Mithras himself who brought about the resurrection of the dead, and so he was savior and redeemer. A last supper and an ascension also appear in the legends of the cult. One cannot then be surprised at St. Augustine's statement that he knew a priest of Mithras who, struck by these resemblances, exclaimed, "Why, Mithras himself is a Christian!"

It was while Mithraism was at the height of its power that it received a deadly blow. The first inroads of the barbarians fell upon the frontier towns of the Empire, where, as a cult that had attained great popularity among soldiers, it was especially strong. Had it not been for this, Renan goes so far as to say, the Western world today would be Mithraic, not Christian.

But let us look at some examples of the Church Fathers' criticism of these *sacra peregrina*, dealing first with the Egyptian deities. These, especially Isis and Serapis, are the target for more than one hot volley of patristic shot, and prominent among their assailants stands the Church Father Arnobius.¹ He is one of the most vehement of the champions of the early church, but his logic falls short of his ardor, and it is with but feeble effect that he ridicules the divinity of the Egyptian gods on the ground that they had failed to protect their temple from fire: *Ubi Serapis Aegyptius cum consimili casu iacuit solitus in cinerem cum mysteriis omnibus atque Iside?*² He dwells also on the manifestly human qualities of Isis and the other gods of the group. "This Isis of yours," he exclaims, "is nothing but a woman searching for her lost son."³ The same theme is elaborated by other Church Fathers. Lactantius not only comments on the human element that pervades the whole sacred drama of Isis, as acted by the priests and devotees at the festival of the deity—their mourning and lamentations as they search for her lost son, the sudden change from grief to joy when his body is found⁴—but he tells us definitely who Isis was. She was Io, the daughter of Inachus. We must not, however, he adds, believe the story that she was changed into a cow and in that shape swam across to Egypt. The festival known as the Ship of Isis (*navigium Isidis*), celebrated every year at Ostia and elsewhere, is

¹ He wrote his *Adversus nationes* about 295 A.D.

³ *Ibid.*, I. 31.

² *Adversus nationes*, VI. 23.

⁴ *Institutiones divinae*, I. 21. 20.

evidence to the contrary. For the ship is obviously the very vessel in which she sailed across to Egypt, where she was worshiped under the name of Isis.¹ Augustine² tells us that in almost all the temples where Isis and Serapis were worshiped there was a statue with finger upon lips, the significance of which was that everyone should be silent in regard to the fact that the gods in the temple were of human origin. In another passage of the same work (X.11) he states that the attitude of the priests of the cult was not always one of prayerful veneration, but that sometimes by means of threats they forced their gods to obey their commands. In regard to Serapis a theory, not of human, but of diabolic origin, is put forward by Paulinus Nolanus.³ According to him Serapis was the devil in disguise, while the *modius* or peck-measure with which his head as a god of plenty was frequently adorned was ultimately derived from Joseph, of whose famous corner in grain it was a fitting and abiding reminder.

In their discussion of the cult of the Great Mother the Church Fathers not only display their customary infelicitous ingenuity in identifying her with many divinities with whom she had not the slightest affiliation, but they attack with even unusual severity the moral aspects of her worship. There was, for example, an annual ceremony (March 27) which consisted in the washing (*lavatio*) of the image and sacred utensils of the goddess in the Almo, a little tributary of the Tiber. This was the occasion of a great procession of priests and devotees in which drum and cymbal played their customary part. But there were scenic representations also, and, if we are to believe St. Augustine, the character of these songs was such as to settle once for all any claims to divinity that might be made by anyone for the Great Mother. They were, he asserts, so vicious that not even the mother of honest men, much less the mother of the gods, would listen to them. *Quae sunt*, he asks, *sacrilegia, si illa sunt sacra? Aut quae inquinatio, si illa lavatio?* The twenty-sixth chapter of the seventh book of the *De civitate dei* is a good example of the vehemence of his denunciation: *defecit interpretatio, erubuit ratio, conticuit oratio.* In another part of the same work (III.12) he indulges in a ponderous priestly

¹ *Ibid.*, I. 11.

² *De civitate dei*, XVIII. 5.

³ *Carm.*, XIX. 98 ff.

irony. The drift of this passage is that it was not on account of Hannibal or other troubles in Italy that the Romans introduced the worship of the Great Mother, but because they suddenly realized that since she was the mother of the gods she must be the mother of Jupiter, and that being so, she should certainly have a temple in Rome where her son had been worshiped for so many years. Furthermore, he continues, if she is the mother of all the gods, she must be the mother of the dog-faced god of the Egyptians, Anubis. He at any rate will not cause any great stirring of maternal pride. But Fever (Febris) is also a divinity. Is Cybele the mother of Fever? The Pseudo-Augustine also attacks the morals of the cult: *antistites matris quae appellatur magna . . . et re vera magna fuit sed meretrix.* Rufinus¹ criticism is of a similar character. Arnobius² fastens with especial vigor upon the dramatic representations of the myth of Cybele and Attis, and is unsparing in his denunciation of their immoral tendency.

I come now to Mithras. A common type of criticism is exemplified in the *Quaestiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti*, a work attributed to St. Augustine but probably written by the same author as the commentaries on the Epistle of St. Paul generally assigned to St. Ambrose. In this book suspicion is cast on the custom, invariably observed by the followers of Mithras, of celebrating their mysteries in underground chapels. Dark places, insinuates the writer, are ever suitable for dark deeds. In the same passage is an account of certain practices of the devotees, some of whom, it is said, imitate the cries of a raven, some roar like lions, while others with hands bound are thrown into trenches full of water. The gloom of the sanctuary is not cover enough for their practices, and those who take part have their eyes bandaged. But the light of the Christian church has penetrated the darkness of the subterranean chapel, and has stripped the bandages from the eyes of many victims, who recanting their idolatry have not only become converts to Christianity but have revealed in all their gruesome details the customs of the followers of Mithras. Paulinus Nolanus also, in the last poem in which he assails the pagan cults, points to the inconsistency involved in carrying on in a dark subterranean chamber the

¹ *De luminibus* 4.

² *Adversus nationes*, VII. 33.

worship of Mithras, whom his followers regarded as a sun-god. "Who," he asks, "would worship light in darkness or conceal the sun in the depths of the earth but the devil himself (*rerum causa malarum*)?" The tests and atrocities hinted at by the author of the passage quoted above are referred to by Gregory Nazianzen also; and the monk Nonnus (sixth or seventh century) recounts and endeavors to explain the ordeals of heat, cold, hunger, thirst, flogging, etc., to which St. Gregory refers. A later commentator, Elias of Crete (eleventh or twelfth century), who wrote in Greek but of whose work we have a Latin version by Billius, shows but scant sympathy with these sufferings of the devotees of Mithras, saying that those who worshiped such a god deserved even more severe penalties. Sometimes much more serious charges are made against the followers of Mithras. Socrates, who flourished about 425 A.D., tells us in his ecclesiastical history of the discovery in Alexandria of human bones on the altar of a sanctuary of Mithras. The discovery was made by Christians, who forming in procession displayed the skulls to the populace as evidence of the barbarous character of the rites of the god. But this incident happened in the reign of Julian the Apostate, who was doing everything in his power to oust Christianity, and the mob, encouraged by the imperial officials in Alexandria, fell upon the Christians and killed many of them, including their patriarch Georgius. Sozomen, the Greek ecclesiastical writer of the fifth century, gives an account of the same event.

The charges contained in these passages, when subjected to scrutiny, are found to contain very little substance. The fact that the votaries of Mithras regularly built their sanctuaries under ground was due to their desire to imitate as closely as possible the grottos which the founders of the faith had used in Persia. The imitation of the cries of birds and of the roaring of lions, and the trials and tests of which so much capital is made were apparently nothing more than part of the rites of initiation. We know that one of the degrees of initiation was that of the raven, while another was that of the lion, and we may reasonably suppose that the tests to which the candidates were subjected were, like most initiatory ceremonies, unpleasant rather than terrible. Furthermore,

we must remember that the information of the Christian writers was derived, as is distinctly stated in one of the passages quoted, from persons who had been converted from Mithras-worship to Christianity. Renegades of all kinds are notoriously unfair to the cause they have deserted. In the case of the most serious charge cited, namely that human remains found on the altar of a *Mithraeum* in Alexandria furnished indisputable evidence of the practice of human sacrifice, a flat denial may be made. When I referred to this story, I mentioned the fact that there are two versions extant, one by Socrates, the other by Sozomen, both apparently going back to the same source. Now it is the version of the latter that in general seems to be the more reliable, and it is worthy of special attention that on this question of human sacrifice its evidence differs sharply from that of the other. Instead of remains of human bodies, it states that fragments of statues of persons, some young and some old, were found beside the altar in the sanc-
tuary.

Other ecclesiastical critics are guilty of errors which show very clearly their ignorance of the cult which they are so ready to condemn. For example, we read in an epistle of St. Ambrose¹ that Caelestis worshiped by the Africans, Mithras venerated by the Persians, and Venus adored by all the world were one and the same divinity. The range and recklessness of this interpretation astonish even one habituated to ecclesiastical misinformation. For you will observe that Ambrose has not only assigned to Mithras a wholly new field but has changed him from a god to a goddess. Undoubtedly the passage goes back to Herodotus i. 131. That author, who traveled extensively in the East about the middle of the fifth century before Christ, says among other things: "The Assyrians call Aphrodite Mylitta, the Arabians call her Alitta, while the Persians call her Mithras." Herodotus is in error here, and in all probability, as Cumont² suggests, he confuses Mithras with Anâhita. Their names are found together in cuneiform inscriptions.

¹ *Epist. contr. Symmachum*, I. 18. 30 (Migne, P.L., XVI, 980): *quam Caelestem Afri, Mithram Persae, plerique Venerem colunt, pro diversitate nominis non pro numinis varietate.*

² *Textes et Monuments*, II, 17.

One curious line of attack represents Mithras as a cattle thief: "He used to drive off other men's cattle," writes Commodianus,¹ "and hide them in his caves, like Cacus the son of Vulcan." And Firmicus Maternus in his famous work *De errore religionum profanarum* makes the same accusation. The explanation of this charge is found in the innumerable sculptured reliefs in which Mithraic is represented as dragging a bull backward like Cacus in the fable, or pursuing or killing it as in the best known of all the Mithraic reliefs, the bull-killing Mithras (*Miθpas ταυροκτόνος*) which adorned one of the walls in so many of the underground sanctuaries. That the Christians should have made these representations the basis of ridicule shows perhaps better than anything else how far they were prepared to go. For the bull was sacred to Mithras. With it was connected the whole Mithraic theory of creation. From its blood after it had been killed by Mithras sprang all the forms of life, animal and vegetable, known upon the earth. According to the theory of the cult his seizure of it was the first step toward the creation of the world, and his killing of it was the consummation of that creation.

Numerous however as are the criticisms made by the Church Fathers, the features of Mithras-worship that irritated them most were those resemblances to their own creed to which I have already referred. Justin Martyr (in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, 70) implies that in their use of grottos and in their custom of having sacred meals there the adherents of Mithras had appropriated and applied to their god the prophecy of Isa. 33:16: "He shall dwell on high; his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks; his bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure." The same author in his *Apology*, when speaking of the sacrament of the Eucharist, refers to the similar practice in the religion of Mithras, and accuses the worshipers of Mithras of having devised a sacrilegious imitation of the Christian rite. Firmicus Maternus devotes a long tirade to their insolence in so frequently describing Mithras as the god of the rock—*θεὸς ἐκ πέτρας*. He objects to their profanation of terms peculiarly Christian: *Christus nobis venerandi lapidis significazione monstratur. Quid tu ad commaculatas superstitiones furtiva fraude*

¹ *Instructiones*, I. 13.

*venerandi transferis nominis dignitatem?*¹ In answer to this it need hardly be pointed out that the rock which the worshipers of Mithras revered had nothing to do with any Hebrew or Christian beliefs, but was merely the rock from which in the Persian story he was born. As regards the charge in connection with the Eucharist, there are clear indications that some form of communion had been a part of Mithraism long before it came in contact with Christianity.

With so much criticism of the type exemplified in the references given above, it is a relief to light upon such a passage as that in the unfinished commentary on Matthew attributed to St. John Chrysostom.² It is a note on the verse: "ecce magi venerunt ab oriente." The author asks the question, "Who were these *magi*, these wise men?" and then proceeds to state that they were a tribe living in the Far East; that their holy book was *quaedam scriptura inscripta nomine Seth*, which contained the prophecy of the appearance of the star; that they watched for it from generation to generation, son succeeding father as the years passed and it did not appear. At last it was seen and they followed it as the New Testament records. The passage is one of unusual interest. For the *magi* were associated with Mithras-worship, and it has been suggested³ that the account quoted is a piece of propagandist literature intended to attract followers of Mithras to Christianity.

These passages are enough to show the trend and character of the Church Fathers' criticism of the oriental cults. It is as open to counter-attack as their treatment of the indigenous Roman beliefs. They ignore essential and important characteristics and level their polemics at trivial and insignificant details. It is moreover especially noticeable that the volume of criticism is much smaller than that with which they assail the older Roman cults. There were so many doctrines in the oriental faiths that resembled their own that silence seemed the safer policy. This is especially true of Mithras-worship. No one now subscribes to that statement of Renan that I quoted above that the decline of this cult was

¹ *De errore profanarum religionum*, 20.

² Cumont (*Textes et Monuments*, II, 65) is of the opinion that the commentary was the work of some scholar of the sixth or seventh century.

³ M. E. Kuhn, *Festgruss an. R. von Roth*, pp. 219 ff.

nothing more than an accident of history. Christianity won because it was the finer moral medium. But there is no doubt that Mithraism was one of the most dangerous rivals that the church has ever known. Certainly the early Christians regarded it as their greatest enemy—one that must be crushed if their own cause was to survive; and many a sanctuary of the Persian god that has been excavated testifies by its smashed reliefs and broken altars not only to the religious fervor but also to the gentle charity of the founders of our faith.